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EXPLORING THE CONSUMER DECISION JOURNEY AND ONLINE SHOPPING  
EXPERIENCE THROUGH AN EMOTIONAL PERSPECTIVE:  
AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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## **Abstract**

Traditional consumer decision-making models have long used quantitative research to address a link between emotional and rational behavior. However, little qualitative research has been conducted in the area of online shopping as an end-to-end experience. This study aims to provide a detailed phenomenological account of consumers' online shopping experience and extend McKinsey & Company's consumer decision journey model from an emotional perspective. Six semi-structured interviews and a focus group of nine people are analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis and five superordinate themes emerged from the results: emotional experience, empathy and encouragement, in relation to brand preference, emotional encounters in relation to consumer satisfaction and emotional exchange and relationship with a company or brand. A model interrelating these themes is then introduced to visually represent the emotional essence of a large online purchase. This study promises to be applicable as a descriptive, and perhaps, better predictive report for understanding the complex consumer decision-making process as it relates to online consumer behavior. Future research topics are also identified.

**Keywords:** Emotions, decisions, online, experience

## 1. Introduction

*“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”* - Maya Angelou, American poet (Kelly, 2003)

Emotions are one of the many factors that have a significant impact on a person's decision-making process. The everyday decisions that people make not only affect their cognitive perceptions and thoughts, but influence their emotional states as well (Carrera & Oceja, 2007; Bell, 2011). Still, the importance of emotions' effect on consumers' behavior is often overlooked as businesses tend to focus most of their attention, energy, time and resources on only managing and planning the rational aspects of consumers' experiences (Kotler et al., 2010). Since the early 1990s, traditional models that strive to explain online consumer decision-making and behavior have been established in the theory of rational choices made by rational people (Ramanathan & Shiv, 2001; Bell, 2011) and literature linked to customer experiences has essentially centralized around cognition and circumstantial or social elements, while the emotional aspects of the process are seldom taken into consideration (Ramanathan & Shiv, 2001; Taylor, 2009; Peter & Olson, 2010).

In the past few decades, online shopping has rapidly evolved into an extremely useful and relatively simple way to purchase products. However, most online retailers continue to predominately concentrate their attention on consumers' reactions to product attributes and online marketing campaigns, rather than observe purchasing behavior through the eyes of the consumer to become aware of their true decision-making and purchasing process (Peter & Olson, 2010). In reality, the new crucial factor that marketers must study and discuss is human emotion and its function in online consumer behavior and decision-making (Kotler et al., 2010; Bell, 2011). In more recent years, this topic area has been gaining attention (Kotler et al., 2010; Bell, 2011), but little to no qualitative research has been conducted to give a voice to the consumer and gain insight into the emotional essence and aspects of an end-to-

end online shopping experience (Bell, 2011). In order to have a truly comprehensive understanding of online consumers' behavior, the emotional aspects of this experience must also be studied from the very beginning of consumers' decision-making process and continue to be analyzed all the way up until and after all decisions are made (Taylor, 2009).

There is a lack of knowledge and depth in recent research that must be addressed to ensure a thorough exploration of consumers' emotional essences as they move through their end-to-end online purchasing journeys. The objective of this study is to address this gap and gain deep insight and understanding into the emotional aspects of an online shopping experience. The significance of this study lies in the fact that consumers are giving a first-person account of their decision-making process and online purchasing behavior from consideration to end to afterthought of an online purchase. This results from this study add to scholarly research, as it relates to online consumer behavior, and the narratives and researcher interpretation give great understanding into the area of affective science.

### **1.1 Research Questions**

The purpose of studying the behavior of consumers as they move through their purchasing journeys is to explore the "lived experience" of large online purchases (over €100) at various stages. More specifically, the purpose is to explore this journey from a first-person perspective and encourage consumers to express their internal conscious observations in detail. This allows us to study their thoughts, emotions and behavior and understand the essence of their online experience from an emotional perspective. Thus, this study addresses the following research questions:

**RQ 1:** What circumstantial factors trigger emotional responses at various stages of the consumer decision journey during an online shopping experience?

**RQ 2:** What emotions do consumers typically experience at various stages of their consumer decision journey during an online shopping experience?

**RQ 3:** How do consumers' emotional states change at various stages of their consumer decision journey during an online shopping experience?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Consumer Decision Journey**

Recent studies and discussions published from scholarly articles across a number of academic journals have come to the consensus that the traditional linear purchase model is too narrow, uniform and generic in today's digital age, rendering it obsolete (Vargo & Lusch et al., 2004; Court et al., 2009; Nunes et al., 2013). Refer to Appendix I for a visual representation of this model. Recent waves in marketing literature are characterized by an advance from product marketing, to relationship marketing, and are shifting focus towards accurately representing the consumers' journey and understanding their mindset during the decision-making process to provide an intensive customer-centric and continuously satisfying experience (Vargo and Lusch et. al, 2004; Boulding et al., 2005; Holbrook, 2006). In 2009, to try and improve the outdated linear purchase funnel model and build upon the thoughts of their predecessors, the consulting group McKinsey & Company studied the purchase decisions of nearly 20,000 consumers across the retail industry from three major markets (US, Germany and Japan) (Court et al., 2009). Based on their findings, the authors suggest that the modern consumer purchasing path is more of a circular, two-way "consumer decision journey" with four critical stages where marketers can either succeed or fail: initial consideration set, active evaluation, moment of purchase and post-purchase experience (Court et al., 2009). Refer to Appendix II for a visual representation of this model. However, the results in this study were obtained by using only quantitative analytics such as surveys, questionnaires or experimental or correlational research and are generalized to a larger sample population. Although the findings are very useful, this type of research and methodology does not fully capture the expressive information of the consumer and overlooks the reasons, motivations, feelings, beliefs and true voice of the individual consumer - all factors which must be thoroughly examined (Ramanathan & Shiv, 2001).

## **2.2 Affective Cognition, Theory of Mind and Empathy**

Affective cognition is commonly researched and explored through an examination of two underlying social-psychological topics: theory of mind, or the capacity to think, understand and form logical judgements about others' mental states, and empathy, or the capacity to perceive and resonate with others' emotions (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Recent studies on these topics have researched how consumers deduce undetectable mental states from observable behavior and outcomes, but fail to address other critical points of information such as individuals' responses to particular behaviors and outcomes (Taylor, 2009; Bell, 2011). Berry et al. (2006) contributes to this discussion by suggesting that consumer experience is the impression created and engraved in a customer's mind during the decision-making process and that customers will continue to obtain experience as long as they are emotionally engaging, consecutively or concurrently, in consumption. Carrera & Ocejja (2007) add their thoughts, stating that the final judgement, either a positive or negative experience which occurs in the post-purchase experience stage, is generally considered to be the most important judgement. This concept correlates with the recent consensus in literature which acknowledges that success in marketing practices can be attributed not only to the quality of the products a company sells, but to the superiority of the end-to-end emotional experience they create as well (Edeleman & Singer, 2009). Although research on affective cognition, theory of mind and empathy have produced valuable insights in recent years, there has been a lack of focus on the fundamental questions and developmental shifts across these topic areas, especially within the field of online consumer behavior (Bell, 2011). While this study does not intended to analyze all elements of the emotions in an online shopping experience, it will address the noted limitations of past research and make theoretical and managerial implications by using an interpretive phenomenological analysis of interviews and a focus group discussion as supporting evidence.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The objective of this study was not to predict a causal relationship between emotions and rational behavior but rather to provide a detailed phenomenological account of consumers' online shopping experience and extend McKinsey & Company's consumer decision journey model from an emotional perspective. In order to successfully address the proposed research questions and gap found in the aforementioned literature, a qualitative approach was utilized and semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion were analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. These research designs were chosen because of their ability to capture the quality, texture and essence of a lived online shopping experience through first-person perceptions and detailed descriptions of the social world (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

#### **3.2 Data Sample**

A purposeful, homogenous sample was selected for this study, meaning the data sample relied on our judgement of the group of people we desired to study. Participants were selected on two conditions: they were between the ages of 20 and 25 and had made an online purchase totaling over €100 within the past year. To ensure diversity among responses, the sample included seven women and eight men and each individual purchased a different product. See Appendix III and IV for each participant demographic table. A manageable sample as such ensured that the data collected was not overwhelming, but was still rich enough to provide detailed accounts of the experience and allow us to observe similarities and differences in each narrative.

#### **3.3 Data Collection**

A total of 15 triangulated individual accounts, 6 semi-structured interviews and 1 focus group of 9 people (excluding the probing moderator), were collected in November



2015. Interview and focus group questions were open-ended and non-directive. The format started with general questions and moved to more specific questions and answers which encouraged each participant to describe their online purchasing experience in as much detail as possible (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). See Appendix V and Appendix VI for each open-question script. The interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded, lasted one hour and were conducted live in a pleasant environment. Data saturation was decidedly reached when, while carrying out our existing analysis, we arrived at a stage in which no new information was being presented in further interviews (Willig, 2001). Once the exhaustive and thorough personal narratives stopped producing significantly new concepts, similarities, or codes, interview collections were stopped so that a thorough analysis could begin.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

To precisely interpret the raw data, a two-stage, double hermeneutic process was implemented. Participants first attempted to understand and recall their experiences in as much vivid detail as possible and we subsequently attempted to understand and interpret their experiences by analyzing the discussion and creating and integrating relevant themes (Willig, 2001). In order to successfully analyze the data, we immersed ourselves in each of the participants' accounts one-by-one several times and analyzed them in agreement with the four fundamental stages of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Willig, 2001). First, wide-ranging and open notes (ranging from questions, comments, summaries, labels, etc.) and similarities, differences, contradictions and echoes were recorded from participants' accounts. Next, these notes were transformed into succinct terms, or themes, which strived to represent the underlying characteristics or quality of what was mentioned in each section of the discussions. Thirdly, emergent themes were chronologically listed and we sought connections between them as we thought about the themes in relation to one another. In this stage, natural clusters and hierarchal relationships were formed as themes reflected similar

meanings or references. Labels were given to each category of themes to better encapsulate their essence and were frequently reviewed to see if they were in accordance with and reflected the primary source material – the actual statements given by the participants. The final stage of analysis called for the prioritization of data and construction of a logically ordered table of superordinate themes. This allowed us to eliminate marginal themes that were generated during the second stage, known as phenomenological reduction, and decide which ones truly captured something about the emotional essence of participants' online shopping experience. See Appendix VII for a visual representation of this table. Each of the 15 individual participants' narratives were analyzed in this process and our interpretation and final report were given to participants to ensure our work was authentic and representative.

### **3.5 Data Validity**

To ensure higher validity, participants' inputs were viewed using imagination variation, or from multiple perspectives, and were treated with equal value in the beginning stages of analysis, otherwise known as horizontalization (Willig, 2001). Moreover, all responses and interpretations were triangulated between two methodologies and were member checked for narrative accuracy and internal, descriptive and evaluative validity, as each interview was conducted and at the conclusion of the report. Finally, to avoid personal perspectives, presumptions and bias, we bracketed our own viewpoints and assumptions, allowing us to successfully explore participants' unaltered consciousnesses and produce authentic results as we arrived at the true underlying essence of an online shopping experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). See Appendix VIII for the bracketed researcher bias.

## **4. Results**

There was great diversity between participant responses as each individual had very different online shopping experiences with different products. Participants' accounts clustered around the five superordinate themes below. In this section, all emergent themes are

discussed in detail and its different forms are illustrated through verbatim quotations. We then interpret these themes and quotes for meaning to gain a better understanding of the online shopping experience at various stages of the consumer decision journey.

#### **4.1 Theme 1: Emotional Experience (Past) and Brand Preference**

Recollections of participants' past experiences with a company or brand provokes numerous emotions and helps give an impression of whether business with an organization would be favorable or not. The experiences that were once had with a company was experienced as either positive, negative or neutral, with different intensity levels.

Participants describe this as a preliminary step of the purchasing process where emotions are first triggered and explored. Marko explained, *"It's simple. I go with the same brand and website I've used before. I know my size and have done business with them a few times, so I assume I'll be satisfied with the purchase again and won't run into problems."*

George, on the other hand, described a moment where he practices caution stating: *"Buying electronics online can be tricky, especially as the prices increase. I mean, if I don't have a previous experience with a company then how can I trust they won't mess things up?"*

Participants talked about their past experiences in specific details and as a whole process. *"If something went wrong during a previous order, I'll consider buying from another company next time. There's always other companies out there who can do better business"* (Camila).

*"Exceptional service always brings me back. From the promotions to advertisement to simple website and follow up - they do it all right"* (Marko). As a new customer, participants expressed a sense of freedom and stress. *"I never purchased one [GPS] before, so I was constantly online surfing for the best possible choice and price"* (Lisa). *"I get worried placing an order with a new brand. I don't know what to expect. What if they rip me off or even worse, steal my money! I'd rather always be a repeat customer"* (Kilian). The emotional memories that participants recall from previous online shopping experiences have great

impact on the beginning stages of their purchasing processes. The overall feeling(s) that they were left with were reflected on and either left them wanting to do business again or hesitant to repeat a purchase with a specific brand or company. Even before entering the initial consideration set phase, a preference could be formed from past memories, as participants acknowledged previous experiences and anticipated the same emotions will be felt.

This notion and desire for previous positive memories and aversion of negative memories was clarified and addressed in the focus group. Participants discussed the idea with each other and reflections were made. *“A [positive] past memory is like a golden ticket to another successful purchase. It’s like the company is saying, remember us? We can do that for you again!”* (Tzvetina). *“I will rarely do repeat business with a brand who didn’t leave me happy. If they are serious about their company, they should know how to do things correctly. Why waste my time and money? No second chances”* (David). Participants start their online shopping experience by recalling and reflecting on past emotional memories. The details of previous purchasing journeys are summed up and brought together to produce one comprehensive recollection that has a specific emotion attached to it. If a past experience was positive and has minimal negative connotation to it, then participants have an impression that continuing with the purchasing process and doing business with a specific brand or company will be worth their while. A negative or simply neutral connotation attached to a past memory leaves participants more cautious and reluctant to follow through with their initial desire.

Online shopping for expensive products is a serious commitment and, since majority of the process is done through a mobile telephone or computer, having a successful previous experience is very comforting for the participants and can take away many concerns they might have. The emotional experiences that are recalled from memories with a company or brand re-appear throughout their accounts and thus form a part of all other themes.

#### **4.2 Theme 2: Emotional Empathy and Alterations of Confidence in Preference**

This theme captures participants' tendency to engage in consumption of social media and other forms of word of mouth and describes how these external sources of information are interpreted and emotionally incorporated into brand perception. This form of emotional empathy was experienced as encouraging, discouraging or neutral with different intensity levels and directly relates with the previous theme considering that it is one of the significant elements that becomes part of a consumer's memory once they reflect on it.

All participants explained that social media is a great way to gain knowledge about a product and a company and illustrated how it can be either an encouragement or discouragement to continue with the purchasing process. *"Before buying it [camera], I could check to see whether or not other people were enjoying their own. That really is a big deal!"* (Linda). *"I saw many reviews about it [handbag]. People were raving about the high quality and reasonable price, so I felt very confident that I was making the right decision"* (Camila). *"I take social media and word of mouth talk very seriously. If people are willing to take time out of their day to shame a product or company, it must mean something went seriously wrong"* (Lisa). Almost all participants stated that they felt a connection with social media posts or word of mouth and believed that they would embrace the emotions and relatively feel the same as the person doing the talking. *"Knowing that people are enjoying their GoPro to the fullest with minimal problems lead me to believe that I would have the same experience as well"* (Kilian). *"If a company can satisfy other people, then they already earned points in my book"* (George). The emotions that people describe about a product or company, whether it be through word of mouth, social media, blogs, or other forms of internet communication platforms, are usually taken to be certain and true, depending on the context.

This topic was heavily debated in the focus group when Alex mentioned that *"You can't always believe what people post or say if you haven't seen or gone through it yourself"*. Selçuk and Erica replied to the statement *"That's a good point, but when the majority of*

*reactions are the same, there must be some truth to it, right?” (Selçuk). “Outliers can usually be overlooked as they are rare cases” (Erica). Social media and word of mouth provide participants with important reviews and relevant information, but also act as a way for them to praise their new product. Linda described this situation, stating: “I was so happy when I finally got it [camera]. I uploaded some pictures I took and tagged Polaroid in it with a thank you shout out”. Marko mimicked this pattern: “If I am happy with the way my new shoes look, there is a good chance I’ll post a picture of them to my accounts.”*

Participants use word of mouth and social media as a supplement to company advertising. Lisa stated that, *“Of course a company is going to tell you their product is the best and that you should order it. But a real, honest review will come from someone who has nothing to lose – a friend or someone on social media”* (Lisa). George adds: *“Online media posting is like an informed sales associate that speaks genuinely and not from cue-cards or using company lingo.”* Participants feel a range of emotions through social media or word of mouth and anticipate these feelings as something they will experience in the future. As social media is mostly used during the post-purchase phase, participants can see how consumers are engaging with their product after purchase and whether or not it sounds favorable. Online shopping can be a difficult process because one cannot physically see the product unless they go to a brick and mortar store, but social media and word of mouth allow customers to experience the product through another’s perspective. Consumers tend to trust this information more than what companies say and having this type of outreach in today’s digital age puts consumers’ emotions at ease, allowing them to make a more informed decisions.

#### **4.3 Theme 3: Emotional Encouragement and Alterations of Trust in Preference**

This theme describes the importance of continual conversation and the emotions it provokes at various stages across their purchasing journey. This encouragement that companies give or fail to give was experienced as encouraging, discouraging, or neutral with

different intensity levels. It relates to previous themes because, as the consumer already has information about a product and brand through online research, participants want companies to give valid reasons why negative reviews from the community should be overlooked.

The focus group discussion regarding this theme was based upon whether too much or too little conversation and encouragement happens during the purchasing journeys. *“I feel like sometimes a company can try to speak with me too much. They don’t need to force conversation. If I need their input, I’ll let them know”* (Lucia). *“I don’t know. I want companies to take away any anxiety, confusion, or frustration away by assuring me that I am making the right decision”* (Pepe). Participants are likely to ponder if there are better options for them to choose. Many participants mentioned that second guessing is a common pattern throughout their purchasing journey and a company can provide conversation that will settle their uncertainty and bring in a sense of comfort and reassurance.

A balanced amount of thoughtful conversation gives participants a sense of peace and nurtures the online relationship. When conversation is strategically initiated, participants feel hopeful about the future of the experience, optimistic about the company’s ability to perform and at ease with their decisions. Marko references this with a statement about the beginning stages of his journey: *“...And it was interesting. The company knew I had purchased them before, suggested products to put in my shopping cart and showed me they were in stock. All without me doing a thing.”* Another participant spoke about not enough conversation in regards to the final, post-purchase stage: *“No messages were sent to me about tracking information. I had to figure out all the information myself.”* (George). Participants easily get annoyed when companies are not valuing them as an individual customer and appreciating the money and time they are spending on their products. If their business is not being recognized, participants feel hurt and will distance themselves from a company. Continual, strategized conversation is important in the eyes of the consumer because it makes the

journey seem worthwhile. With proper conversation and engagement, participants feel respected and valued as well as emotionally stimulated to the point of confidence.

Participants not only want companies to talk with them, but listen to them as well. This was brought up in the focus group with a statement from Alessandro: *“If I have a complaint, sometimes I want to tell the company directly so they do not make the same mistake with someone else. I want to speak with a human and make sure they listen.”* Tzvetina later added: *“If my complaint is listened too and addressed quickly, I’m more focused and satisfied with the quick attention rather than the problem itself.”* Participants are frustrated when companies do not listen enough or respond to inquiries within a reasonable amount of time and these emotions impact their trust a company or brand.

Online shopping can be a stressful experience if there is nobody helping to guide participants along each step of their journey. However, if there is an optimal amount of conversation and listening between the company and participants, participants will feel more comfortable with their actions and more trust will be developed between both parties. Participants place great importance on a company’s conversational skills and expect to be engaged in reassuring exchanges at various points throughout their journey.

#### **4.4 Theme 4: Emotional Encounters and Alterations of Consumer Satisfaction**

This theme reflects participants’ interactions with companies’ service-encounters and touchpoints and illustrates how the quality of these interactions provoke many emotions that affect consumers’ satisfaction. The emotions stemming from these numerous encounters have a range of intensity from not pleased, very pleased to content. This theme directly relates to the three previous themes because these emotional encounters involve conversation from the company, inspire conversation from outside sources and are a significant portion of the memory that is created and engraved in the participants’ minds.

Participants mentioned how various encounters at different stages can provoke



different emotional responses. *“Excessive advertising is one of my biggest pet peeves. A company can damage their reputation with me, and leave me anxious if they force something on me I don’t want”* (Camila). *“If a company is on the first page when I do a Google search, I already immediately feel like they are a brand that is respected and feel like I would be in secure hands if I chose them”* (Linda). However, participants describe how they felt at the purchase and post-purchase phases more than in the initial stages of their journey and especially reference one of the most important encounters: the website. *“I knew that it was a respected brand, but still, clicking that ‘proceed to checkout’ button was worth €250 and I had to double check and make sure everything was correct and secure before I proceeded”* (Kilian). Many participants spoke about how having product details and price comparisons can be very helpful and leave them content and aware of the situation while others took time to discuss the possible negative aspects of the website encounter and how it makes them feel. *“A cluttered website with too many buttons and links always leaves me confused and annoyed. I know it could be simpler”* (Lisa). She continued, *“I get annoyed when I have to create an account for a company’s website”* (Lisa). *“Simple one, two, three browse, select, pay websites are much more enjoyable to use than ‘noisy’ websites”* (Camila).

On the other hand, many participants in the focus group discussion stated that the product quality itself was the most influential touchpoint. Selçuk mentioned: *“If my product arrives and it is not the same quality mentioned or if they messed up the order, I will feel betrayed.”* Marko stated, *“The colorway and comfort of the shoes keeps me coming back”* and Camila said, *“...since it was such a steep price for an everyday bag, I expected it to last for quite a while”* (Camila). Participants enjoy easy to use touchpoints that function properly and expect their product to be of the quality advertised. If any touchpoint is misrepresentative or a hassle to endure, then participants will assume the company is not taking the consumers’ purchasing journey seriously and may cancel or return their online order.

In fact, many participants mentioned or referred to a physical brick and mortar store when talking about these emotional encounters: “*I wanted to try the headphones out before I bought them*” (George). “*I went to a store and tested out the camera first*” (Linda). Even though product details are presented, it has good reviews and the company maintains encouraging conversation, participants can still feel uncertain purchasing a product, and may very well go to a brick and mortar store to physically feel and try the product. Doing this allows them to feel fully satisfied and pleased with their decision, rather than placing the online order and hoping for the best. Moreover, if an online website is not informative enough or is too informative and clogged with information, an in-store purchase may be a participant’s first choice. Finally, post-purchase customer service was noted as very important, should a participant encounter any problems. In an online shopping experience, participants encounter many of the same touchpoints as they would with an in-store purchase. However, the biggest difference and concern of all is the website, payment and shipping process. Participants tend to be skeptical and feel worried that something may go wrong, but if a company’s touchpoints are simple, easy to use, secure and functioning properly, then participants are left feeling satisfied with the purchase and without a sense of regret.

#### **4.5 Theme 5: Emotional Exchange and Relationship with Company or Brand**

This theme directly builds on the previous four themes and provides a final description of the end-to-end online shopping experience that participants had with a specific company or brand. All the emotions that were felt up until this point were reflected on and one general description of their emotional state was given, ranging on a scale of not pleased, very pleased or content with different intensity levels. This final theme relates to the others by wrapping up the entirety of the online shopping experience and giving a distinct review of the essence of the experience based on emotions felt from the previous four themes.

All participants describe their online shopping experience as an accumulative range of

emotions provoked by numerous factors that include, but are not limited to, past memories, external conversational influences (from the community and the company) and various encounters or touchpoints. Marko stated that, *“At the end of another repeat purchase, I was just as happy as the last time and ready to share my new look with my friends”* and Camila mentioned, *“I was happy with my purchase and the online experience went just as I hoped.”* All of the participants were happy with their most recent personal purchase, but noted that this is not always the case. This theme carried over into the focus group where participants like David stated, *“Purchasing any product online is like an emotional rollercoaster”* and Lucia mentioned, *“At the end of an online purchase, I’ll either feel a sense of happiness or regret. Sometimes both.”* Participants in this very final stage are assessing their entire end-to-end journey up until this point on an emotional scale and seeing how the essence of the experience has been overall. Participants desire to look back on their experience and feel delighted and thrilled with the purchase rather than worried and upset.

After reaching an intuitive conclusion call, participants reassess their feelings and see if they are overreacting or if they can justify their online shopping experience judgement. In this stage, if participants feel an unfavorable way, they will be much more hesitant to do business with the same brand again. However, if they believe the experience to be a success, they will tend to share their feelings with others and encourage more new customers to take part in the same experience.

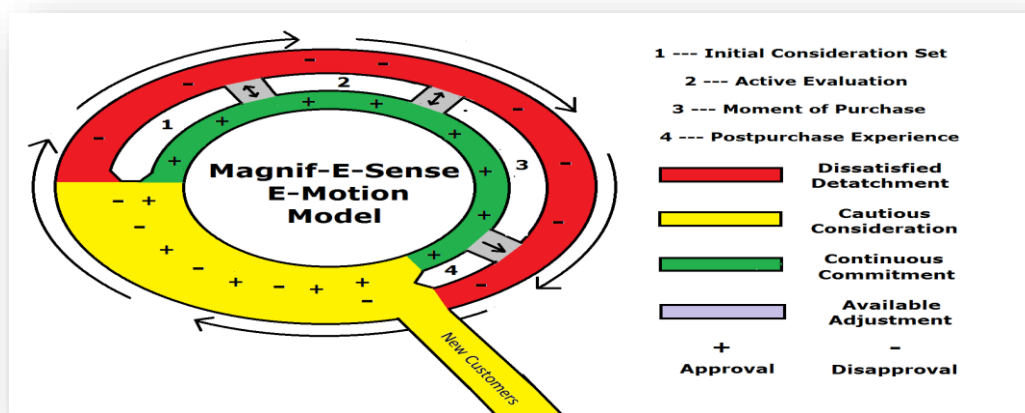
Online shopping is a series of emotional exchanges between consumer and company and the sum of these exchanges can build or destroy a participant’s relationship with a brand. There are many factors and moments that shape this final review of exchanges and some are out of the participants’ control. Participants’ main focus is to purchase a product with ease and be satisfied with its quality. If this is completed, the end-to-end journey will be described as a positive one. Not all moments in the purchasing journey must be positive, but if very few

are negative, participants view the journey as pleasurable and are willing to continue doing business with a company providing this type of satisfying online shopping experience.

This final theme directly relates and essentially overlaps with the first theme as the totality of emotional exchanges over the course of an online purchasing journey equates to the memory they will reflect on in the future when they consider another purchase. This thought was discussed in detail in the focus group and Pepe mentioned, *“The emotions I feel at any one time determine my mind state and attitude for the next online purchase”* (Pepe). If participants are satisfied with the essence of their experience, they will not hesitate to consider the same purchasing journey again. However, if there were significant emotional downsides throughout the journey, participants cautiously move through the purchasing journey and question whether they should continue moving toward a subsequent purchase. Emotions are a significant part of purchasing a product online and the totality and reflection of these emotions determine if the experience was a success or a failure.

#### 4.6 Magnif-E-Sense E-Motion Model

To interrelate the five themes that emerged from the analysis process, a model titled the “magnif-e-sense e-motion model” was created. This model visually represent the results of the study and the emotional essence of a significant online purchase:



**Figure I:** Magnif-E-Sense E-Motion Model

## 5. Discussion

The findings suggest that, across the various stages of the consumer decision journey, participants undergo a range of emotions depending on the context of the scenario and where they are at in their journey. Berry et al.'s findings are confirmed as it is clear that consumers' impression of a brand or company are continually established in their mind as they move about their decision-making process and continue to emotionally engage in the purchasing journey (Berry et al., 2006). However, this study extends this theory and proposes that participants are emotionally affected, not only by marketing stimuli, but personal and external social stimuli as well. We suggest that, as the participants move through their online shopping experience, marketing stimuli does not elicit a direct rational response immediately, but rather produces an internal emotional response, which is then reflected on prior to consumers' next decision stage in their purchasing journey. It is important to note, however, that participants do have control in whether or not they accept the emotion they are feeling, or rather determine it is not valid.

Confirming Edelman & Singer's (2015) theory, the superiority of the end-to-end emotional experience is just as important as the quality of the products a company sells. The findings suggest that it is less likely a consumer will continue through with an online purchase or repurchase if there is no emotional connection with the experience a company provides. Moreover, McKinsey & Company's consumer decision journey model is challenged as we suggest that there is no such thing as a straightforward loyalty loop. We suggest there is the chance of a repeat purchase happening, but it cannot be assumed one will automatically continue business and bypass the first two stages in the purchasing journey for any reason. Participants noted that, no matter how satisfying a purchasing journey was, there will always be outside influence and the need for continuous and careful research and evaluation.

Furthermore, the findings suggest there is more than one direction that consumers can take while engaging in this experience. The researcher has proposed three names for the direction that a consumer can take in relation to the magnif-e-sense e-motion model, depending on their emotional connection with the journey at any specific point: ‘Continuous Commitment’, where consumers embrace forward movement and remain on the internal positive route, ‘Dissatisfied Detachment’, where consumers no longer embrace forward movement and remain on the external negative route, and ‘Cautious Consideration’ where consumers cautiously consider the idea of doing business with a brand while weighing their subjective feelings. ‘Available Attachments’ illustrate consumers’ chance to switch from a favorable to unfavorable path (or vice versa, except for after moment of purchase).

We conclude by suggesting that thoughts are short term experiences, whereas emotions precede thoughts and are more influential and longer lasting. Consumers’ emotional experiences in an online shopping experience cannot be neglected as affective judgements are presumed to be an accurate representation of the experience and integrate with participants’ rational behavior and intuition.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study set out to explore three research questions: At various stages of the consumer decision journey during an online shopping experience, 1) What circumstantial factors trigger emotional responses? 2) What emotions do consumers typically experience? and 3) How do these emotional states change? A qualitative research approach was used to answer these questions and a magnify-e-sense e-motion model was produced to visually represent consumers’ sense of direction as they move through their purchasing process.

### **6.1 Theoretical and Managerial Implications**

This study contributed several insights into the topics of affective cognition and online consumer behavior and decision making. The results touch upon elements of theory of mind

and empathy that tend to go overlooked and provide insight into consumers' actual emotions and the circumstantial context of the experienced emotions. The proposed model addresses consumers' sense of direction at various stages of their purchasing journey in relation to their emotional state of being and illustrates how consumers shift their mindset and potentially behave differently based on approval or disapproval of various factors.

The results of this study may prove useful to managers seeing that the findings combine affective and cognitive elements and can assist in demonstrating which emotional elements are requested and necessary in particular circumstances. Marketers should develop contingency plans for each of the five themes mentioned and try to understand where each individual customer stands in relation to these themes in order to improve emotionally flawed areas and maintain emotionally positive aspects of the journey. Managers can use this study's findings and proposed model to build and maintain healthy relationships with their customers and increase purchase intentions by providing a favorable journey that benefits both parties.

## **6.2 Limitations and Future Research**

There are limitations in this study that must be addressed. These findings are strictly based on qualitative data and the accounts that were analyzed reflect only the online shopping experience of these 15 young adults who are between the ages of 20 to 25. There may be inconsistencies in what people said or recalled from their online shopping experience. Participants spoke of their conscious observations, without being able to address potential unconscious influences. With this research approach, there is no such thing as complete phenomenological reduction. The identification, description, categorization and interpretation of emerging themes were justified by the researcher and it is likely that additional themes that could have been addressed. Moreover, this study and analysis cannot explain a causal relationship between emotions and rational behavior. Finally, more description, interpretation and quotations could have been provided for each theme, if space and time permitted.

Future work should test and confirm the results found in this qualitative study by using a quantitative approach and triangulating the data with other mixed methodologies. We suggest a quantitative study be performed to explore and attempt to explain if, and under what circumstances, one or more themes dominate or counteract the others. In addition, a supplementary qualitative study should be performed using Grounded Theory methodology to test the cause and effect pattern of behavior between the two variables mentioned in each theme and develop marketing strategies that organizations can use in particular circumstances. Finally, this study should be replicated using a varied population sample and different homogenous variables to test the claims and see if the results remain true.

Exploring the consumer decision journey and online shopping experience from an emotional perspective provides many overlooked insights into online consumer behavior. The challenge for firms in today's digital world is to understand consumers' thoughts, desires and emotional needs and meet or exceed them in a proper manner. The results of this research may be utilized by online retailers and marketers to better understand the complex consumer decision-making process and perhaps better predict and influence online consumer behavior.

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